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SUBJECT: Sarkani Pilot District Visit

Ref: A) Kabul 3286
B) Kabul 2940

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1. (SBU) Summary: On October 19, Coordinating Director for Development and Economic Affairs, Ambassador E. Anthony Wayne, and Commander of the International Assistance Security Force Joint Command (COMIJC) Lieutenant General David Rodriguez visited the District Center in Sarkani, Kunar Province, to assess Afghan government capacity in this pilot District Delivery Working Group (DDWG) district (Ref A). The dynamic Sarkani District Sub-Governor and line ministry officials outlined their governance challenges: the poor connection between the central government in Kabul and the District; low salaries for district employees; lack of operating budgets for most government offices; high unemployment and a dearth of economic opportunities; and the porous Pakistan border, which undermines security. A separate visit to the women's shura revealed the sobering challenges faced by the predominantly widowed and uneducated members: severely circumscribed economic opportunities and limited voice. Nevertheless, the presence of a dedicated District Sub-Governor and other officials represent an opportunity for the DDWG to help Giroux provide needed services in a strategically important area. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Ambassador Wayne and General Rodriguez were accompanied by Senior Civilian Representative - Regional Command East (SCR-E) Dawn Liberi, USAID Mission Director William Frej, visiting SRAP Senior Provincial Reconstruction Team Advisor Derek Hogan, and other senior Mission officials. The delegation met with District Sub-Governor (DSG) Hamish Gulab, Ministry of Mines representatives Noorullah and Ashquallah Abdul Rahman, and, separately, with Ministry of the Interior Representative Zar Halim (responsible for National Registration), Principal Village Elder Representative Khialy Gul, and Ministry of Agriculture representatives. Liberi and other female members separately met with the Sarkani District Women's shura.

3. (U) Sarkani is located four kilometers from the mouth of the Ganjgal Valley, where four U.S. Marines were killed in a complex attack on September 8. The town lies within a security cordon provided by a coalition force forward operating base and camps for both the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan Border Police (ABP). The District Center was built some years ago with USG funding. Four of the six DDWG pilot districts are located in RC/E (Sarkani (Kunar), Khogyiani (Nangahar), Baraki Barak (Logar) and Sayed Abad (Wardak)).

(Low) Salaries Paid, But No Operating Budgets

3. (SBU) Representatives of each of the line ministries visited were enthusiastic when describing their work, but uniformly said that although civil servant salaries are paid on time at the end of every month, their offices receive no operating budgets, and the salaries are far too low. The DSG said corruption is prevalent "everywhere" and could only be tackled through increased salaries. The Ministry of Mines representative (who in resolving land disputes also carries out a jahQ)Fshuras and jirgas - remain the primary governance system throughout Sarkani District. To better connect the government to the people, the DSG convenes once a month a district shura, comprising a

14-member women's shura and 14-member men's shura, to discuss district governance and development. The DSG said Sarkani has its full complement of authorized civil servants, but could use a forestry expert. Several line ministry representatives said their offices have no direct contact with their parent ministries in Kabul, but must work through their counterparts in Asadabad, the provincial capital. With the exception of Agriculture representatives, the line ministry officers said they had few if any training opportunities.

Challenges: Jobs, Health and Border Security

15. (SBU) The DSG said the district's biggest challenge is high unemployment and lack of economic opportunity, an uneducated populace, and an underserved and under-resourced health sector (only one clinic for 95,000 people, and few medicines or qualified doctors). Security remains a concern, particularly in capillary valleys such as Ganjgal, where Afghan government officials cannot go in their official capacities due to the threat from Taliban elements. (But teachers and medical staff can travel there, the officials said.) The DSG and other interlocutor's emphasized better border control would greatly enhance security, while the district representative responsible for issuing national identification cards noted that the presence of ABP and the Pakistan military at several key crossing points had reduced cross-border intra-tribal contacts. In a discussion of the September 8 ambush in Ganjgal Valley that

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claimed four coalition force and 12 Afghan NSF lives, the DSG appealed for locally-hired community policing in Ganjgal. In answer to a query from LTG Rodriguez as to whether Sarkani residents understand, in the face of Taliban propaganda, the United States' commitment to help Afghans win their struggle for a better future, an Agriculture line representative replied that Sarkani residents see through the Taliban prevarications, concluding rhetorically "can you cover the sun with one finger?"

Good Harvest, but Value-Chain Problems

16. (SBU) The Agriculture line ministry representatives cited good harvests this year but noted that frequent flooding in the Kunar river valley and insufficient irrigation in areas further from the water harms productivity in Sarkani District. The absence of cold storage facilities or other value-chain infrastructure reduces the economic benefits of bountiful harvests. "We don't want to buy flour from Pakistan," one representative said, noting the farmers are interested in better seeds and new technology. One representative said he had received USAID training in Jalalabad in 2007, but otherwise the Sarkani Agriculture line ministry receives no international donor support.

Women's Shura: Sobering Realities

17. (SBU) Separately, SCR-E and other female delegation members attended the women's shura, along with ten of the 14 shura members. The shura leader is a teacher. Her husband runs the Sarkani District school, where she is also an instructor, and together they earn approximately AFN 4,000 per month (USD 81). The majority of the shura are widows, impoverished and uneducated. The widows told the delegation that they seek jobs rather than handouts, noting that if they got money it would lead to jealousy and demands by others for a share. They cited seamstress work and agricultural work as opportunities they would like to pursue. However, they'd prefer to be given work for payment rather than open their own enterprises. The shura wants to increase women's education in Sarkani District. Other issues that concern the members are a lack of medical supplies and corruption in the District Center. The women alleged that humanitarian assistance provided through the District Center is diverted by staff and never distributed to local families in need.

18. (SBU) The women's shura was established informally in 2008 when the members participated in a sewing project, and continued to meet as a shura thereafter. The shura convenes infrequently, for specific purposes, and previously last met in May, 2009. The shura members

said they feel like they do not have much of a role in district decisions, as they are almost always overshadowed by their male counterparts. They seemed enthusiastic at the prospect of discussing and make an impact on women's issues, but did not appear convinced the men's shura or others would listen to them. (Note: It is not clear whether the women's shura is entirely welcome in the District Center. The women claimed they had asked for an office but the DSG told a female member of the delegation that they had declined his offer of space in the center, preferring a separate facility. End Note.)

Comment

19. (SBU) Sarkani district enjoys tenuous security as a result of its proximity to a coalition force base and Afghan National Security Force camps, as well as security gains achieved in the Kunar River valley over the past 18 months. The relatively secure environment, coupled with an engaged local government, provides an opportunity for the DDWG pilot district program to enable GIROA to provide much needed services in a strategically important area. The DDWG program will help address the need for a de-centralized operational budget and salary reform for civil servants to help stem extensive corruption. The second of six DDWG pilot districts visited, Sarkani presented a different view from that of Nawa district in Helmand province (see REF A), but both are prime examples of why local governance capacity effectively linked to the center is urgently needed to address the myriad challenges facing Afghanistan. End Comment.

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